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DOCUMENTARY REVIEWS

“Seeing is Believing: The Truth about UFOs” by Peter Jennings, ABC-TV, February 24, 2005.

The pre-show publicity for this two-hour program was remarkable: a full page ad in *Newsweek*, and presumably elsewhere, claiming that “the reporting on UFOs finally gets serious.” I knew they had ample material to draw from. One of the producers told me that about 200 hours of footage, including some of me, did not make the final cut. Thus, there were good reasons to expect something reasonably significant, perhaps the possibility that the program might break the long mainstream media taboo on serious treatment of the topic. Whether or not that was accomplished will take some time to determine. Certainly there has been no immediate consequence of this sort.

In the weeks following the airing of this documentary, I read enough criticisms, mostly justified in their own context, to make me reconsider my own initial impression that the show had been “pretty good,” a cut above the usual treatment on the cable channels. It was only when I played the show back four weeks later, with the luxury of stopping and taking notes, that I found my initial impression had been correct.

A bit of background: Since the early 1980s, there have been thousands of sightings of black triangular craft, delta-shaped objects that appear to be pitch black but usually with bright, sometimes flashing lights at the three apexes and often one in the center. They seem to be one to several hundred feet in length and width and move extremely slowly and in complete silence. Seen only at night (so far as I know), they are usually observed to block out large areas of the sky as they move, or even hover, overhead, frequently at low altitudes estimated at a few hundred feet. While this kind of craft and its behavior would be a challenge to explain, those characteristics alone are within the realm of possible secret, dirigible-like, stealth technology.

Arguing against that is an analysis of hundreds of such reports by the former National Institute for Discovery Science (reported in www.space.com, a mainstream aerospace commercial website) that the objects are being openly

deployed over and near population centers and interstate highways, seemingly in a way to attract attention, which is quite inconsistent with the covert deployment of advanced Department of Defense (DoD) aircraft for testing purposes. The secret F-117 and B-2 aircraft were only rarely spotted in sparsely populated areas prior to their being acknowledged.

The long timescale is also strange. Covert craft usually become operational, hence public, in less than the 23 years since the Hudson Valley sightings of black triangular craft (and I believe there are other reports going back to the 1960s). Last, there is an amazing feature that would imply more than mere advanced technology, but actual new physics. There are numerous reports of the objects suddenly accelerating at rates that would appear to violate the law of inertia.

None of these summary points of the black triangle phenomenon are made in the documentary. Instead, two specific cases are discussed early in the show dealing with such sightings. The “Phoenix lights” event of 1997 is described by several witnesses as involving a large craft of this sort that blocked out the stars. At this point, the program jumps ahead to a later sighting that evening. This has footage showing four lights hovering in an arc above the city, which were joined at intervals of several seconds by a fifth, a sixth, and then a seventh light. Retired Air Force pilot and CSICOP scientific consultant James McGaha credibly identifies this event as flares . . . and makes some scoffing statements that appear to be directed at the first event. However, his belittling comments that the observers are merely “connecting dots” are quickly followed by several of the witnesses of the earlier event maintaining that they had seen a solid structure, and in my view the program leaves the impression that these people witnessed a quite different phenomenon than the one being criticised by the debunker. McGaha also likely annoyed more viewers than he won to his side by stoking his scorn with such terms as “mythology,” “superstition,” and “fairy tales.” His dismissive attitude does not compare well with the plainspoken “I know what I saw” stance of the eyewitnesses.

The triangular craft event of January 2000 is more impressive. Five police officers at different locations witnessed a triangular object as long as a football field gliding over three towns in southern Illinois between 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. Actual tapes of the conversations between the officers and the dispatcher are included. One of the officers reported that the object suddenly departed at a high rate of speed. However, no official investigation was made (because officially neither the Air Force nor any other government agency has any interest or investigative program). This is a powerful segment in the show. No attempt is made to explain it away.

This brings the program back to when official investigations began: the June 1947 sighting by pilot Kenneth Arnold. He is portrayed as a no-nonsense, straight-shooting guy, and newsreel footage from that era openly portrays the Army Air Force as ready and eager to intercept the Flying Saucers: “Army planes are on patrol”; “They’re seeing flying saucers everywhere.” An official top-secret investigation in 1948 concluded that “the Earth was being visited by

alien spaceships.” (For a discussion of the military assessments and decisions in this initial era see the article by Swords, *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 12, 103, 1998, which ostensibly is about the Roswell claim, but actually covers a great deal more territory.)

The program states that since 1948, commercial and military pilots have reported thousands of sightings. Several pilots give short descriptions. One describes an object that blotted out the stars like a submarine moving overhead above his aircraft. Later in the program the co-pilot of a B-52 who was directed to check out reports of UFOs near ICBM sites near Minot, North Dakota, claims he spotted an enormous structured glowing craft hundreds of feet long, which also showed up on his radar. In more recent times an Airbus 320 pilot flying at 39,000 feet says he saw an enormous dark red object above the clouds beneath him (assuming the simulations, claimed to be highly accurate, are correct) that, in *Star Trek*-like fashion, faded out like a Klingon cloaking device.

The peak of the early frenzy occurred in 1952 when thousands of reports came in, many focused on Washington, D.C., including radar detections. This famous flap in the summer of 1952 is not elaborated upon, rather, it is used to introduce the idea that clogging of communication channels was of such great concern during the height of the Cold War that it was concluded that public hysteria posed a national security risk and, as a result, the whole topic of UFOs needed to be dispelled. The CIA-convened Robertson Panel in 1953 made the recommendation to do so by making the subject the topic of ridicule.

This is one interpretation. An alternative, of course, is that the recommendation to publicly discredit the phenomenon beginning in 1953 was due to the recognition that something serious was indeed at stake and needed to be kept under tight security wraps. The public needed to be placated and deceived. Although the program does not draw this conclusion, it does specifically claim that project Blue Book became little more than a public relations debunking effort. Hundreds of reports coming in every year apparently did nothing more than get filed away by one mid-level officer and two or three low-level assistants while the public was being assured that competent investigations were underway.

At the halfway point, the program leaves the impression that there is abundant evidence from credible witnesses coming in from 1947 to the present day. This part of the program ends with a section on astronomer J. Allen Hynek. As the chief investigator for project Blue Book, he was exposed to 12,000 investigations over a 20-year period. The program portrays him as going from skeptic to believer in the reality of the phenomenon. He is shown favorably as a possible future hero for bravely calling for serious scientific investigation, which the mainstream science community, none of whom had anywhere near his first-hand experience, soundly rejected.

Although the title of the show is “Seeing is Believing,” this is definitely not the track taken by mainstream science in the next segment. We are told that

“Mainstream science rejects eyewitness testimony. . . . It is the lowest form of evidence.” Seeing is therefore definitely not believing. As a professional astronomer myself, I understand the origin of this stance, the requirement for repeatable observations, for hard evidence (such as real alien hardware).

This insistence is perfectly reasonable when dealing with a natural phenomenon. However, the observation and history of the UFO phenomenon suggest that there may be two confounding factors at work that could completely undermine the otherwise rational scientific approach: an agenda for whatever intelligences may underlie the UFO phenomenon, and an agenda for whatever programs may have followed the Robertson Panel recommendation to confuse and ridicule while carrying on serious work in secret.

It comes across quite clearly in the program that from the time of the Kenneth Arnold sighting in 1947 and into at least the early 1960s, the possibility of an extraterrestrial explanation was taken seriously by the U.S. military. This goes hand in hand with the Robertson Panel recommendation to practice disinformation.

One does not have to be a conspiracy fanatic to suspect that the termination of the Air Force interest in UFOs in 1969, either at the recommendation of or, more likely, under the cover of the Condon Report, was merely a termination of the public side. Government investigations in the late 1940s and 1950s certainly had a classified component. The continuation of classified investigations in the post-Condon era and the evolution of these efforts into modern special access programs is a plausible, and perhaps even compelling, conclusion.

As of 1997 there were about 150 Codeword Special Access Programs (SAPs) within the DoD, according to a U.S. Senate Report by Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Report of the Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy: 1997, Senate Document 105-2). Codeword SAPs have their own, highly compartmentalized security systems, which are totally separate from the general confidential, secret, and top-secret DoD system. There are “white” and “black” SAPs, the “black” ones being those whose very existence is a top secret. The most secret of the Codeword SAPs are unacknowledged and also waived, the latter term meaning that they are excluded from having to reveal their subject matter even to the chairs and ranking minority members of the House and Senate appropriations and authorization committees. They are thus officially exempted from congressional oversight. They are also under no requirement to automatically and voluntarily brief a sitting president. (President Clinton was known to have an interest in this topic, but evidence suggests that he did not insist on asking the right people the right questions, and it is plausible that his relationship with the military and intelligence organizations was such that those associated with a highly sensitive black SAP could well have decided, so long as not directly asked for a briefing, to refrain from volunteering any information.) Black programs are usually situated in government contractor facilities and are effectively beyond the reach of Freedom of Information Act requests.

The fact that such waived, unacknowledged Codeword SAPs exist is not disputed and is discussed in the Senate Report and also in an article in *Jane's Defence Weekly* (see www.ufoskeptical.org). The question is, do one or more such programs exist specifically on the UFO topic and what information or evidence would it have? Over the years I have been told by sources I trust that that is the case, but that proves nothing. Still, I would argue that a highly compartmentalized system definitely is in place that could maintain strict secrecy for decades. (A government program that secretly hired hundreds of private companies during the 1940s and 1950s to process huge volumes of nuclear weapons material, leaving a legacy of poisoned workers and contaminated communities that lingers to this day, was not exposed for almost 50 years. It finally came out in an expose in *USA Today* in September 2000.)

Most scientists today probably would come down favorably on the “life elsewhere” hypothesis, as the show next demonstrates. As one astronomer states about life in the Universe: “To suggest that we are alone is inexcusably egocentric.” But there is a very tight limit put on how communication or contact may legitimately occur according to the preconceptions of mainstream science, with SETI radio contact being the preferred channel, of course. Some of this is due to a worldview that our material physical reality is the only possible one, even though superstring, M-brane, and inflation theory offer unlimited opportunities for radically different adjacent realities. Some of the mental blinders are more psychological: realities that science has no way (yet) to deal with are threatening and not welcome.

The Roswell segment begins with a cursory but reasonable summary of the events. There is even footage of Maj. Jesse Marcel reminiscing 31 years later on what he discovered on the Brazel ranch in 1947. He recounts metal that would not dent and could not be bent. He states that there was “so much of it” and then forthrightly that it “was not anything from this Earth.” But after that the program abruptly switches tone, launching into a steady stream of pejoratives with continuous references to promoters springing up every way they could, buying into conspiracies, hitting the jackpot, escalating sensationalism to have a bestseller, demanding ever more exaggerated claims to cash in on the gold rush to Roswell. The program stoops to shots of characters in sleazy alien costumes pandering to summer time tourists to reinforce the point that nonsense is running amuck. Switching from fake aliens to an Air Force officer in uniform holding a press conference, the Air Force contention in the mid 1990s that Project Mogul wreckage could explain it all is taken at face value as the solution. Dropping any pretense of objectivity, Jennings himself calls Roswell “a myth” which has become an “article of faith” to true believers, and that’s the end of that.

Now I don’t know what really happened at Roswell, but I have a very hard time believing that Col. William Blanchard, commander of one of the most elite bases in the military—owing to its unique atomic capabilities—would have been so naïve as to authorize a press release going out to the entire world stating

without reservation that a flying saucer had been retrieved if all he had was an assortment of weather balloons, sticks and foil. I also cannot believe that Maj. Jesse Marcel was so incompetent as to mistake such flimsy junk for an alien craft. But to drive the message home that that is indeed what happened, the program resorts to visual effects morphing some Mogul-like debris into the material Maj. Marcel is shown holding in the famous photo that the Air Force staged in Gen. Roger Ramey's office the very next day to successfully squelch the story with ridicule. Perhaps the only thing one can conclude from Roswell and its history is that fact and fiction can become mixed, muddled and manipulated so as to completely obscure the truth, whatever that might be.

The mind-boggling implications of the multi-dimensional worlds of superstring and M-brane theory, and the multi-verse inflation theories of modern cosmology in which all manner of alternate laws of nature are possible in adjacent universes, have not yet been factored into the UFO equation by mainstream science. We have a situation today in which physics and astrophysics are open via their own forefront theories to the possibility that intelligences may exist that may be radically different from ours and that may not even be physical in the sense of obeying the laws that govern our particular Universe. Other brane universes may be separated from ours by tiny distances in additional dimensions, which certainly weakens the "can't get here from there arguments" usually advanced.

The closest the program comes to such possibilities are the wonderful comments of physicist Michio Kaku about wormholes and his challenge to mainstream science about UFOs to "let the investigations begin!"

I have saved commentary on the abduction section of the program for the end, in part because that is where my own "don't want to hear anything about it" bias comes in. The pat explanations given by the two scientists sound reasonable on the surface but fall apart completely for the apparently numerous cases that do not occur while the abductee is sleeping at night or that involve multiple abductees. All I can say is that it is a shame that the interview with the late Prof. John Mack is not used. But this is a topic best reviewed or discussed by others.

In summary, the show is better than the usual fare on this topic. At least Peter Jennings treats the subject seriously and respectfully, and this is perhaps a sign of progress. As is usually the case, in the desire to appear balanced, substantive witness reports are often countered by unsubstantiated pronouncements of experts who sound authoritative but do not necessarily know a great deal about the subject and have their own hobbyhorses to ride.

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